

Provence at a Glance



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Geographic Generalities

Provence is a region located in the eastern part of the Midi or south of France. It comprises three distinct geographic areas. The Alps in the north cover half the land. Several of the peaks rise above ten thousand feet. The winters are cold and long, and temperatures of 20°F and lower are not uncommon. For centuries, communication between valleys was difficult, and the inhabitants of these regions lived in isolation. In the west and south the rich alluvial plain of the Rhône River separates Provence from Languedoc. The countryside is dotted with orchards, vineyards, fields, and market towns. The third geographic section of Provence is the rugged coast from Grau-du-Roi to Menton. The Mediterranean Sea varies in color along the coast from deep blue to emerald green. Warmer than the Atlantic and almost without tides, the Mediterranean soothes the rigor of the winters and allows the cultivation of tropical plants and fruits, including lemons, oranges, and bananas. Villages and cities on the coast lived by fishing until tourism changed their economic destiny at the end of nineteenth century.

Provençal skies are generally sunny and crystal clear, especially when the *mistral* or cold northern wind blows. The air is dry. Summer temperatures vary depending on the area. In the valleys they can reach 95°F. On the coast they are generally five to seven degrees cooler.

History in Brief

The cave of Vallonet (Roquebrune) is the most ancient archeological site in Europe. Stone tools, broken animal bones, and the vestiges of a fire show that the cave was inhabited about one million years ago. Other discoveries such as Terra Amata in Nice (400,000 years old) confirm the presence of humans in prehistoric times in Provence. The earliest peoples known to have inhabited the area were the Ligurians (900 B.C.) and then the Celts (700 B.C.). The Greeks founded Marseille in 600 B.C., and the Romans invaded the area in 125 B.C., settling there for the next five centuries. Provençal language, laws, and customs have deep roots in Latin culture.

In the fifth and the sixth centuries Provence was invaded by Visigoths and Franks. The Treaty of Verdun in 843 granted Charles the Great's grandson, Lothaire I, the kingdoms of Burgundy and Provence, which passed into the hands of his son Charles in 855. In the eighth century the Arabs had raided Provence and settled on the coast in the mountains near St-Tropez. They were finally defeated and driven out in 972.

From 1125 to 1246 Provence was the object of a fierce battle between the counts of Toulouse and the kings of Catalonia. At that time, a new religion spread in the southwest around the town of Carcassonne. Its disciples, the Cathars (from the Greek "Catharsis" or purification), preached a return to simplicity and believed in the coexistence of Good and Evil, a doctrine probably influenced by the followers of Zoroaster. In 1136, Pope Alexander III declared the Cathars heretics, and a long persecution began. French King Philippe Auguste joined forces with the pope and waged a bloody war against the entire southwest. The South was ransacked, and in 1244 the Cathars were finally defeated at Montségur. Under pressure from France, Berenger V, count of Provence, married his elder daughter, Marguerite, to King Louis IX of France in 1234 and his younger daughter, Béatrice, to Charles I of Anjou, the king's brother, who became the count of Provence. Charles III, the last descendant of the Anjou branch, bequeathed Provence to King Louis XI of France in 1481.

After the French revolution of 1789 Provence was divided into administrative units or *départements*, which today include Alpes-de-Haute-Provence (capital: Digne-les-Bains), Alpes-Maritimes (Nice), Bouches-du-Rhône (Marseille), Hautes-Alpes (Gap), Var (Tou-*lon*), and Vaucluse (Avignon).

Language and Culture

French is the main language of Provence, but Provençal subsists in remote villages and among the older population. Provençal is a language that evolved from Latin. In medieval times it was spoken throughout the entire South and was the language of culture and literature—the Langue d’Oc of the troubadours. It was then called Provençal, but nowadays the term Provençal refers only to the language and culture of Provence. The Southwest speaks what is now called Occitan. Provençal is not a dialect of French; it does not sound like French and is not comprehensible if you have not studied it. During the twentieth century Provençal incorporated many French words, but Catalans and Italians are still better able to understand it. There are various dialects, including Rhodanien (west), Gavot (north), and Nissart and Mentonnais (east). The farther one village is from another, the more significant are the linguistic differences. Provençal was still widely spoken before World War II, especially inland and in the rural communities. In the 1970s, it was introduced into the school system as an elective. There are few who use it as a first language, but many who understand it.

The Provençals are proud of their language, culture, and local pronunciation of French. For them the North starts a couple of miles above Orange. Traditionally they are talkative and hospitable, with a good sense of humor. There is a definite nonchalance about Southerners that is often mistaken for laziness.

Practical Information for Travelers

Best Time to Visit. Those who do not mind the crowds can travel to Provence in July and August. However, June and early September are also wonderful months for a visit, much quieter and less hot. In the winter many hotels are closed.

Tourist Information. Each town has a tourist information center that hands out free maps of the towns and brochures about hotels, restaurants, museums, special events, and other entertainment options. It is a good idea to stop by first, before visiting the town. Websites included in this guide enable you to obtain more specific details or a complete list of hotels and restaurants or the local festivals.

Hotels. For each town worth a visit, this guide suggests a few hotels. A list can be obtained through the local tourist office. Breakfast is often continental, but more and more hotels are offering it buffet style during the high season. The number of stars indicates the quality, five (very rare) being the highest category. Prices vary depending on the season and the place: high season is July and August; Cannes and St-Tropez are more expensive than Manosque or Orange. Four-star hotels start at about \$200 for a double room, three-star hotels at about \$75, and two-star at roughly \$45. Some chain hotels such as Novotel do not charge for children, provided they stay in the same room as their parents. The lists in this guide are not exhaustive but include detailed information such as phone and fax numbers, email and Web addresses, and the availability of air conditioning (AC), pool, and parking or garage.

Restaurants. Even the smallest village has at least one restaurant. Dinner is rarely served before 7:30. Menus with prices are always posted at the entrance. The minimum for a three-course meal is about \$16 without wine or alcoholic beverages. Children's menus are about \$7. The tip is included in the bill.

This guide lists only gourmet restaurants or those offering local specialties. Price varies according to the number of stars. Unlike the

rating scheme for hotels, one Michelin star* for a restaurant indicates very good cuisine, two stars means excellent, and three stars is the top. The lack of a star certainly does not mean that the cuisine is bad but simply that the restaurant is not one of the few that have been selected.

The quality and speed of service will depend on the number of people in the restaurant and the mood of the waiter or of the cook, but on the whole, in a French restaurant, the chef is king. To get the quickest service, the rule is first come, first served—so come at 7:30. In Provence, as elsewhere in France, the doggie bag custom is totally unknown.

Most but not all restaurants have a nonsmoking section. Provence also has fast food places such as McDonald's.

Museums. Museums generally charge a fee (from \$3 to \$5). A discount is possible for students. Most museums close between 12:30 and 2:30, and all day on Tuesday. Some are always free, others only on Sundays. For museum enthusiasts, a pass is sometimes available, but often with a regional or time limit. Inquire at the entrance.

Telephone and Fax. From abroad dial 33 (France) and then the local number without the 0. From France dial the number without 33 but with the 0.

Transportation:

Airports. Marseille-Marignane is thirty minutes from the center. Nice is an international airport, and Delta Airlines has direct flights from New York to Nice. The airport is twenty minutes from the center.

Trains. Trains will get you most places, but a good measure of patience is necessary, for they are often late, and strikes are common. A Eurail-pass is often a good deal, but it must be purchased in the United States prior to departure. Several versions are available.

Car Travel. Travel by car is the most convenient. Cars are available for rent at the airports (Marseille, Nice). Leasing a car from the United States is also a good and cheaper solution. Standard shift cars are still

the rule, although more automatics are becoming available. Gasoline is more expensive than in the United States, but French cars get better gas mileage (forty to fifty miles per gallon). Diesel fuel is cheaper, and diesel cars are often an option. Contrary to what is commonly believed, driving in France presents no problem.

Roads and Tollroads. Roads are generally good. The N roads or “nationales” are larger but have more traffic. D roads or “départementales” are smaller and quieter. Freeways are tollroads and more expensive than in the United States. The speed limit on the tollway is 130 km per hour or 81 mph.

Maps. This guide includes several maps but does not replace a detailed road map of Provence, available at any service station.

Parking. Difficult in the town centers. On a street you must pay a meter. Parking lots are usually underground. When you enter, push the button, get a card, and then park. You pay at a machine before you take your car. (Insert your card and pay the required amount. Have change ready. Some machines accept a credit card payment.)

Bicycles. Western Provence is flat and ideal for biking. Bikers should use small, quiet D roads and avoid the N or national roads, where traffic is heavy.

Main Festivals

In the summer months (July and August) just about every other town has its own music, theater, or dance festival. They last from a couple of days to several weeks. However, Provençal celebrations take place over the entire year. Most include traditional dance, music, and costumes. The exact days may vary from year to year and are often chosen only a few weeks in advance. Following is a list of the most important festivals, with approximate dates:



JANUARY

Middle of the month: Festival of St-Marcel, Barjols.

FEBRUARY

First Sunday: Olive Festival, Nyons.

Middle of the month, lasting three weeks: Carnival (Mardi Gras), Nice. Lemon Festival, Menton.

Third Sunday: Corso du Mimosa (mimosa parade), Bormes, near Le Lavandou.

MARCH

End of the month: Flower Festival, Hyères.

Last Sunday: Festin des Cougourdons (small pumpkins feast),
Nice-Cimiez

MAY

1: Fête des Gardians (bull herders festival), Arles.

16–18: Bravade (folk festival), St-Tropez.

23–24: Religious Festival, Stes-Maries-de-la-Mer.

Two weeks mid-May: International Film Festival, Cannes.

JUNE

Mid-June: Fête Votive (religious festival), Stes-Maries-de-la-Mer. Snail-lantern ceremony in Gorbio (near Menton) and Eze (near Nice). Medieval Festival, Manosque (three days).

Last weekend: Fête de la Tarasque, Tarascon (three days).

24 through July 2: Arles Festival—Pegoulado (night parade with traditional costumes) and bull races.

JULY

First Saturday: Venetian Festival, Martigues.

First weekend: Festival of St-Eloi, Châteaurenard. Lavender Festival, Valréas.

First week: Nostradamiques (Nostradamus Days), Salon.

6–31: Opera and classical music, Aix. Chorégies d'Orange (opera). Nuits de la Citadelle, Sisteron.

Mid-July: Jazz Festival, Juan-les-Pins (ten days).

Mid-July: Lavender Festival, Valensole. Feria (bull races, parade with costumes), Stes-Maries-de-la-Mer.



Third week: Provençal Festival, Annot.

End of the month: Medieval Festival, Eze. Giono Days, Manosque. Festival of Sainte-Baume, in the village.

30: Festival of the Virgin (Festo Vierginenço), Stes-Maries-de-la-Mer.

AUGUST

First week: Lavender Festival, Digne.

First Sunday: Grape Festival, Fréjus.

First two weeks: Theater Festival, Ramatuelle, near St-Tropez (ten days). Festival of St-Laurent, Eze.

15: Fishermen Festival, Bendor, near Toulon. Provençal bull races, St-Rémy.

Third weekend: Provençal Festival, Séguret. Lavender Festival, Ste-Agnès, near Menton.

S E P T E M B E R

First week: Rice Festival, Arles. Diane Festival, Moustiers.

Middle of the month: Olive Festival, Mouriès, near Arles.

End of the month: Festival of St-Michel, Marseille; takes place in the 9th and 10th districts or *arrondissements*.

O C T O B E R

First weekend: Olive Festival, Ollioules, near Toulon.

Middle of the month: Provençal cuisine and products, Mouriès.

23: Chestnut Festival, La Garde Freinet, near St-Tropez.

N O V E M B E R

Second week: Gastronomic Days (Les Journées Gourmandes), five days including a weekend, featuring local produce and southern cuisine, Vaison-la-Romaine.

Last week: International Dance Festival, Cannes.

D E C E M B E R

Dance Festival, Aix.

First Sunday: Wine Festival, Bandol.

Second weekend: Shepherds Festival, Istres.

24: Provençal mass, Lucéram (near Nice), Allauch (near Marseille), Les Baux, Arles, St-Rémy, Stes-Maries-de-la-Mer, Tarascon.